

# Crimean War's impact on mail from Australia, 1855-1857

## Purpose

This exhibit illustrates the Crimean War's effect on conveyance of mail from Australia, when contract steamships commandeered by the Admiralty for war service were replaced by clipper ships. Covers document the resultant reversion to sail and the performance of the clippers as mail carriers.

## Scope & Organization

The exhibit begins with a letter carried by the last steamship to depart Australia during the war, capping a year of dwindling steamer availability. It then continues through three periods:

- Single-voyage contracts in early 1855, as steamships became increasingly unavailable;
- Continuous contracts from June 1855 through 1856 with the Black Ball and White Star Lines;
- Noncontract clipper sailings in 1856 and 1857.

The exhibit concludes with an early 1857 cover that marks the return of contract steamship service.

## Background

Great Britain and France declared war against Russia in March 1854. In November 1854 General Screw Steamship Co. withdrew from its contract for carrying Australian mails when the Admiralty began commandeering their steamships for use in the Crimean War. The P&O followed suit in December, leaving Australia without scheduled steam service; foreign mails then reverted to conveyance by sailing ship.

Fortunately, by the 1850s hull and rigging designs had greatly improved in the form of clipper ships. First built in Boston by Donald McKay, these full-rigged vessels were the world's fastest ships, and were sturdy enough to take advantage of the strong prevailing westerlies below 40° S.

Clippers sailed from Liverpool via the *two-capes route*: around Cape of Good Hope, a stop at Melbourne, then with few exceptions a return to Liverpool via Cape Horn. Each voyage was thus a circumnavigation.

## Last steamer from Australia after 1854 termination of steam-packet service



Melbourne, 16 February 1856

Prepaid 1/4 for via Marseilles, but endorsed per General Screw *Hellasport*, bound for Singapore  
P&O steamships from Singapore to Galle, Suez, Malta, and Marseilles  
Mails in London on 28 April, where rated 4<sup>d</sup> due for far East mail 73 days

No contract steamships left Australia after 1 January 1855; three more sailed during the rest of that year, but on a non-contract basis. *Hellasport* was the last remaining steamship, and sailed only because she was sold for scrap to a buyer in Singapore.

# Single-Voyage Contracts, Black Ball Line

January-May 1855

## First contract clipper to sail from Australia



Paid 4/-  
quadruple ship-letter fee  
1-2 oz.  
Black Ball *James Baines*  
Melbourne 11 March  
Liverpool 20 May  
Liverpool rated 2/- due  
quadruple 6<sup>d</sup> uniform rate  
Rec'd. 22 May 73 days

*Victoria had refused adoption of the 6d uniform rate of 1 October 1854, so GPO London treated this letter as unpaid.*

Castlemaine, 9 March 1855

**69 days to Liverpool, fastest recorded homeward voyage by a sailing ship**

## First clipper mail subject to the British retaliatory rate

Paid 1/- ship-letter fee

Black Ball *Lightning*  
Melbourne 11 April  
Liverpool 29 June

Liverpool rated 1/- due,  
retaliatory packet rate

Rec'd 30 June 81 days

*On 20 June 1855 GPO London initiated a retaliatory rate against Victoria. Incoming letters were treated as unpaid: packets letters charged 1/-, ship letters charged 8<sup>d</sup>*



Melbourne, 11 April 1855

*Victoria's ship-letter fee was 1/- from 1 May 54 to 1 July 55, when the 6<sup>d</sup> British uniform rate was belatedly adopted.*

**Marco Polo: first homeward packet under the uniform rate**

Paid 6<sup>d</sup> uniform rate

Melbourne credited 5<sup>d</sup>  
to U.K.

Black Ball *Marco Polo*  
Melbourne 22 July  
Liverpool 20 October

Liverpool marked paid

Rec'd 22 October

90 days



Melbourne, 21 July 1855

**Unfavorable winds prevent reaching Liverpool, landed at Queenstown**



Geelong, 21 August 1855

Paid 1/- double uniform rate, Melbourne 10<sup>d</sup> credit to U.K.

Black Ball *Oliver Lang*, Melbourne 23 August, Queenstown Ireland 26 November  
Liverpool marked paid on 28 November, London the same day 97 days

Named for *Donald Mackay*, Black Ball ship designer



Paid 6<sup>d</sup> uniform rate  
 Melbourne credited 5<sup>d</sup>  
 to U.K. .  
 Black Ball *Donald McKay*  
 Melbourne 2 October  
 Liverpool 28 December  
 Liverpool marked paid  
 Rec'd 29 December  
 89 days

Melbourne, 29 September 1855

Newspaper Wrapper to Ireland

Paid 1<sup>d</sup> newspaper rate to Melbourne;  
 No postage for conveyance to U.K.

Black Ball *James Baines*  
 Melbourne 28 November  
 Liverpool 2 March

Ireland arrival unknown

Delayed by calms off Cape Horn  
 Made Liverpool in 95 days

**Three Victorian wrappers from this  
 decade are recorded**



Geelong, 20 November 1855

Before January 1856, Melbourne had no credit or debit handstamps for postmarking letters under the uniform rate. Credits went to the contract holder: 5<sup>d</sup> for a British contract, 1<sup>d</sup> for a Victorian contract, 3<sup>d</sup> to each P.O. for a non-contract sailing.

First Continuous British Contract, Black Ball Line

June-December 1855

**TOO LATE: Six pence fee for reopening the mail bag**



Paid 6<sup>d</sup> uniform rate, 6<sup>d</sup> late fee  
 Melbourne 5<sup>d</sup> credit to U.K.  
 Black Ball *Champion of the Seas*  
 Melbourne 27 October  
 Liverpool 25 January  
 Rec'd 26 January 93 days

**Finest of eight  
 foreign-mail covers  
 with *TOO LATE* stamp**

Melbourne, 26 October 1855

Early Non-Contract Voyages, White Star Line

June-December 1855

**The line's fourth sailing from Australia**

Paid 6<sup>d</sup> uniform rate  
 Melbourne 3<sup>d</sup> credit to U.K.  
 White Star *White Star*,  
 Melbourne 29 August  
 Liverpool 27 November  
 Rec'd 28 November  
 92 days



Melbourne, 29 August 1855

## Second Continuous British Contract Black Ball Line

January 1856–March 1857

To Connecticut, paid only to England



Prahran, 25 December 1856

Paid 6<sup>d</sup> uniform rate

Black Ball *Lightning* : Melbourne 27 December, Liverpool 24 March  
Liverpool 12¢ debit to U.S

Ocean Line *Washington* : Southampton 26 April, New York 12 March  
New York rated 33¢ due for British debit, Am. Pkt, and inland

Rec'd 14 April 111 days (88 days to Liverpool)

### The 1856 Clipper Contracts

The 1856 GPO contracts with both the Black Ball and White Star Lines were slightly less onerous than the 1855 agreements.

1. Sailings were to be monthly between Liverpool and Melbourne. Mails to be delivered to the Postmasters of Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney at the contractor's expense. [*biweekly for each line, departing on the 4th and 19th*]
2. Mail were to be delivered to the Postmasters of Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney within 78 days of Liverpool departure. [*versus 68 days in the 1855 contract*]
3. The penalty for late departure from Liverpool was £100/day; for late delivery in Australia the penalty was £20/day. [*versus to £30/day in the 1855 contract*]
4. Contractors would receive 50% of postage on letters, books and packages, and half a penny for each newspaper.
5. A £20/day bonus was to be paid for beating the 78-day limit.
6. The PMG could cancel the contract for any reason after giving six weeks notice in writing.



Colonial Contract  
White Star Line

January 1856–March 1857

Paid 6<sup>d</sup> uniform rate  
Melbourne 1<sup>d</sup> credit to U.K.  
*Champion of the Seas*  
Melbourne 16 July  
Liverpool 13 October  
Rec'd 16 October  
105 days



Port Albert, 4 July 1856



Geelong, 23 August 1856

Paid 6<sup>d</sup> uniform rate, Melbourne 1<sup>d</sup> credit to U.K.  
*Lightning*, Melbourne 28 August, Liverpool 20 November  
Rec'd 21 November 87 days



Colonial Contract  
White Star Line

January 1856–March 1857

Landed at Kinsale Ireland



Paid 6<sup>d</sup> uniform rate  
Melbourne 1<sup>d</sup> credit to U.K.  
"Too late" for Kent sailing;  
White Star Sardinian  
Melbourne 27 June  
Kinsale 11 September  
Rec'd 13 September  
109 days

Melbourne, 27 June 1856

Landed at Gravesend

Paid 1/-  
double uniform rate  
Melbourne 2<sup>d</sup> credit to U.K.  
White Star True Briton  
Melbourne 13 September  
Gravesend 8 December  
Rec'd 10 December  
102 days



Echuca, 29 August 1856

When adverse winds prevented landing at Liverpool, clippers put into the nearest port, from where mails were then sent by steamer or rail.

## Colonial Contract

January 1856–March 1857

### Via Ceylon, endorsed for Marseilles but routed via Trieste

Paid 11<sup>d</sup>: 6<sup>d</sup> uniform rate,  
5<sup>d</sup> French transit, <1/4 oz.  
Melbourne retained 5<sup>d</sup>, 6<sup>d</sup> credit to U.K.,  
French transit and British inland  
*Formosa*, Melbourne 31 July  
Galle 1 September  
P&O steamers to Galle, Suez & Trieste  
Rail from Trieste (11 Oct) to Ostende  
Rec'd 14 October 99 days

**The only clipper sailing to Ceylon  
Sole Victorian cover paying 11<sup>d</sup> rate**



Melbourne 28 July 1856

### To Prussia via Liverpool & Aachen



Melbourne, 27 September 1856

Paid only to the U.K., 6<sup>d</sup> uniform rate, Melbourne 1<sup>d</sup> credit to U.K.  
White Star *Red Jacket*, Melbourne 2 October, Liverpool 29 December  
Unpaid to Prussia via Ostende and Aachen at 8<sup>d</sup> (7 Sgr) rate eff. July 1852  
Aachen exchange office mistakenly added the 1d credit, and rated 8 Sgr due

Rec'd 1 January 97 days

**Four covers paying this rate to Prussia are recorded**

Landed at Crookhaven, County Cork



Melbourne, 16 January 1856

Paid 6<sup>d</sup> uniform rate, Melbourne 3<sup>d</sup> credit to U.K.  
 Eagle Line *Albatross*, Melbourne 18 January, Crookhaven Ireland 2 May  
 Mails dropped at Crookhaven, sent overland to Dublin  
 Kingston-Holyhead packet, thence to Glasgow

Received 5 May 110 days



Dublin

2 recorded by Tabcart



reverse

Unable to reach Liverpool

Since 1711, all ships entering the United Kingdom had been required by law to land their mails at the first port of call.

5 May 1856, London Standard: “Albatross arrived Crookhaven 2 May 1856 en route Melbourne-Liverpool.”

12 May 1856, London Daily News: “The Eagle Line ship Albatross, Captain Allen, which for the last fortnight has been beating about the channel owing to adverse winds, was towed into the Mersey on Saturday evening [10 May]. She left Melbourne on the 18th of January and has 18,000 ounces of gold.”



Maryborough, 31 May 1856

Paid 6<sup>d</sup> uniform rate, 6<sup>d</sup> registered; Melbourne 3<sup>d</sup> credit to U.K.

Wigram Line *Kent*, Melbourne 11 June, London 2 September; London rated 6<sup>d</sup> due for registration

Received 5 September 98 days



Geelong, 26 February 1856

Paid 6<sup>d</sup> uniform rate, Melbourne 3<sup>d</sup> credit to U.K.

Eagle Line *Eagle*, Melbourne 28 February, Gravesend 22 May

Rec'd 22 May 86 days



**Black Ball's first non-contract sailing after termination of their mail contract**



**Geelong, 26 November 1856**

Paid 6<sup>d</sup> uniform rate, Melbourne 3<sup>d</sup> credit to U.K.  
 Black Ball *Ocean Chief*, 26 November, Liverpool 23 February 1857

Rec'd 23 February                      90 days

**Sailed with 72,311 ounces of gold**

**Beginning of the end of contract clipper service**

The Treaty of Paris, formally ending the Crimean War, was signed in March 1856. Meanwhile, in February the Admiralty had already advertised for tenders for renewal of steamship service to Australia, planned to begin in early 1857. In August 1856 the Admiralty served notice of contract termination to both the Black Ball and White Star lines; the last British contract clipper was Black Ball's *Donald Mackay*, which left Liverpool on 5 October 1856. All six clipper-ship packets from Australia after September 1856 were under colonial contracts. An additional five clippers sailed as private ships.

Colonial Contract  
Non Contract

January 1856–March 1857

Landed at Gravesend



Paid 6<sup>d</sup> uniform rate  
Melbourne 1<sup>d</sup> credit  
to U.K.

*Orwell*  
Melbourne 31 Dec  
Gravesend 6 April  
London 6 April

97 days

Melbourne, 29 December 1856

To New Hampshire via London, American Packet to New York

Paid 6<sup>d</sup> uniform rate  
Melbourne 3<sup>d</sup> credit  
to U.K.  
*Sydenham*  
Melbourne 6 February  
Gravesend 3 June  
London 3<sup>c</sup> credit to U.S.  
Havre Line *Fulton*  
Southampton 3 June  
New York 16 June  
New York rated 24<sup>c</sup> due  
Rec'd 18 June  
139 days



Melbourne, 31 January 1857

The three pence credit was applied in error: effective 1 January 1857 the sending country kept all postage, with no accounting.

**Return to Steam  
British Contract Steamship**

**Overland via Marseilles**

**European & Australian Royal Mail Co.**

**Second homeward sailing under the contract**



**Melbourne, 14 February 1857**

Paid 9<sup>d</sup>, 6<sup>d</sup> uniform rate, 3<sup>d</sup> French transit (to ¼ oz.)  
E&ARM *Simla*, Melbourne 15 February, Suez 26 March  
E&ARM *Jura*, Alexandria 28 March, Malta 31 March  
E&ARM *Cambria*, Malta 31 March, Marseilles 3 April

Marseilles rated 5 decimes due for inland

Received at Dinan 5 April 51 days

***The earliest of 3 Victorian letters to pay this rate, effective 1 January 1857***

**The New Steam Contract**

*The Admiralty signed a five-year contract with E&ARM on 14 October 1856, stipulating monthly service between Southampton and Alexandria via Malta, and between Suez and Sydney via Galle and Melbourne. Ships were to call at King George's Sound when homebound, and at King George's Sound and Aden outbound only for coal. Very challenging times between ports were set in hours, as were times for mail deliveries. Financial penalties for non-adherence were steep.*

*The company lacked the ships, technical expertise, and management skills necessary to deliver the expected results. Break-downs were common from the start, and fines for lateness put the company in financial peril. E&ARM underwent a partial merger in July 1857 with the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company, who eventually assumed full responsibility for the contract when E&ARM closed its doors in April 1858.*